

the pavements are burning by darthdarcy

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

in a year of boredom, insecurities, and the illusion of freedom, el finds an interest that is all her own.

or:

el has to learn lessons in friendship, apologies, and adolescence. (max mayfield teaches jane "el" hopper how to rollerskate.)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy. this is a monster of a headcanon for me. originally i wanted to write ELEVEN DOES DERBY and i might still do that, but for now i want to focus on max and el becoming bffs who hold hands while roller skating ;___;

December 29th, 1984

The first time Eleven saw rollerskates, a commercial for the local Hawkins Roller Rink played during Days of Our Lives. A group of chipper teenagers, all dressed in striped turtlenecks tucked into pants that looked painted on, glided across a smooth white floor, arms interlaced, huge curving smiles in place, on...

"Steve," Eleven said, enchanted. She leaned forward ever so slightly, squinting at the strange footwear. A jingle played in the background, telling kids one and all to come down to the rink. "What are those?"

"Hmm?" Steve muttered over the rim of his glass of Pepsi (Hopper stopped buying Coke after Eleven cried the first time she found a twelve pack in the cabinet). Ice clinked as he set the glass down on the rickety coffee table, fingers immediately reaching for the overflowing bowl of chips they were sharing. Between him and Dustin, they were determined to expand El's repertoire of junk food beyond Eggos and candy. "What are what?"

"Those," El said, reaching out with one finger to touch the hazy image of moving feet. She stroked the warm glass as a couple twirled, arms crossed and hands clenched, laughing as their feathered hair fluttered under a scrawling yellow cursive sign edged in red, ROLLER KINGDOM, HAWKINS.

"Oh," Steve said around a glob of Doritos he'd just stuffed into his mouth. His status as a legend to Dustin was mostly a mystery to El. For a boy with a reputation for being beautiful, he sure was messy and gross sometimes. "Those are rollerskates. That rink is a roach

coach, by the way. I've never been, but it's kinda lame if you ask me. Just going around in circles to shitty disco."

Steve lacked Mike's storytelling gift, the ability to explain concepts so succinctly and with such care that Eleven could actually grasp them in the desperate, outstretched fingers her mind and curiosity had become.

However, he did know how to confuse her further, to create questions within questions.

Which is why she went to Mike next.

Naturally.

Steve was long gone and Hopper was home, stretched across the threadbare sofa with his hat tipped over his eyes, listening to a basketball game, when El curled her fingers around her brand new Supercomm.

(Hopper came home with it two weeks ago, boxed and clumsily wrapped in shiny red paper, his face sheepish. "I won't keep you from them again," he'd told her, and Eleven could have sworn his eyes were wet. "I just want you safe." Ever since, she and Mike talked twice a day, every day. Once before school, and for an hour or so in the evening (usually at least two), until they both fell asleep. El had to personally increase the Supercomm's range with her powers so she could hear every single word Mike said, but she found it easier and less painful the more she did it, the happier she felt. And she always felt happy talking to Mike.)

She was on her bed, perched atop a peach and pink quilt Joyce had bought for her, her bedside lamp with its slightly crooked shade casting shadows across the cold wood floor.

"Mike?" She whispered into the radio, nervous, as if she were still sneaking around, desperate for any interaction with him, any glimpse, constantly afraid he would forget about her. She couldn't quite believe they had reunited, even a month or so since the cabin

and the Mind Flayer, only two weeks since the Snow Ball, when they'd kissed six times. Six. El could still feel the warmth of Mike's lips on hers, brief and sweet like candy, like a beginning.

It was so strange, being real and tangible again.

There was a brief crackle of static, and then Mike was there, boisterous and confident over the speaker, his voice brimming over with excitement. He rarely kept her waiting. "Jane?" The only time Mike ever called her by her given name was over the radio, or when they talked on the phone. Hopper insisted, as they never knew who was listening, even after the government had packed up and shipped out of Hawkins. "Hey! How was your day? Over."

"Good," El replied, clenching the radio and grinning. She never used Walkie Etiquette, something Lucas and Dustin took great pleasure in ribbing her about. Mike never minded, even though she'd heard him yell at Lucas many times. She just didn't understand it. She didn't understand a great many things. (She used to, and still did, feel sad about her gap in knowledge. It could still be a sore spot sometimes, but her friends, all of them, had assured her it was okay to not always know things. It was okay to be confused.)

They talked back and forth for a while, Mike's answers long and rambling and eager, El's stunted, more descriptive than they had been at twelve, but with pauses that were slowly, slowly being filled the more she sat with Hopper and Nancy at the kitchen table, the more she pored over her dictionaries and encyclopedias.

She'd always be quiet though, no matter how many words she learned, how far she progressed with her studies or life experience, but conversations with Mike would always be like dancing, like muscle memory. (*Muscle memory: the ability to reproduce a particular movement without conscious thought.* El had discovered the phrase through Hopper when they were reading one evening, and the first thing she'd thought of was the Ball. When she and Mike hadn't stumbled once over each other's feet, despite never looking down.)

In a short burst of silence between the two, between Mike's rapid fire chatter about school and DnD, his fervent descriptions of what they would do when she was finally finally free, and El's plodding

retelling of the soap opera episodes she'd watched that day, she casually asked, the perky Roller Kingdom jingle still in her head, "Mike...what's roll-er-skates?"

"Roller skates?" Mike replied, his voice hitched just slightly in surprise. "They're shoes with wheels on them. People wear them for fun. They make you feel like you're flying. It's called skating." He didn't even pause for breath. "Did you see the rink commercial today? Over."

"Yes."

"It plays like twenty times an hour. I'm surprised you haven't seen it before. Did you like the skating? Over."

"Yes."

She didn't hesitate. "Do you know how?" He'd already promised to teach her how to ride a bike when she was finally free, and El looked forward to that day with the same eager anticipation of a child approaching their birthday. To El, Mike seemed to know just about everything. And anything he didn't know, he was dedicated to researching for her. He never made her feel silly when she asked questions, never laughed. Even now, El could picture the expression on Mike's face perfectly, the pinch between his brows, the earnest look in his eyes. Dustin, Lucas, Steve, even Hopper and Joyce had all chuckled at one or more of her blunt questions. Mike never had.

She pressed the crackling Supercomm radio to her chest, grin turning to a soft, adoring smile. *Mike.*

"To skate?" He replied. "Nah. Nancy used to go to the rink when she was in elementary school. She was terrible at it though. Why, do you want to learn? Over."

El considered it. If she wanted, she could make herself fly, just like she'd levitated Mike with her mind, the time he'd jumped from the quarry and her heart had practically leapt from her chest along with him. But those roll-er-skates...how happy the kids looked as they glided across the white, like magic...

She knew you couldn't trust people on television; Hopper had told her a thousand times. Happiness on tv did not equal happiness in real life. But she'd heard all about the arcade, the diner, the park, the movie theater. Never the rink, and that confused her. Wasn't it fun, flying across the floor? Twirling like two dancers in an old movie? Or had her friends never experienced it?

El's fingers clenched around the radio. For once, the first time in her short life, she felt drawn to an interest that was just for her. Even her powers weren't exactly hers, but this? This could be.

"Yes. Can Nancy teach me?"

Mike snorted in an explosion of static, making El jump. "If you want to learn how to fall on your ass, then sure."

El was disappointed, an odd feeling, but one she knew too well.

"Oh."

"I'm sure we can find someone to teach you though, if you want. We'll find a way. Over."

El's affectionate smile grew, and she pressed the Supercomm to her cheek, face warm with a blush Mike couldn't see.

(He always made things possible.)

"Yes."

(And then, twenty minutes later, earlier than usual so Mike could study for an upcoming Biology exam, they said goodbye. It was the same every night, both of them filled to the brim with words, with promises for each other they didn't quite know how to voice:

You'll come to school with me one day.

You're the most amazing person I've ever met.

I didn't know kindness until I met you.

Sometimes you're the only thing out there that makes me feel real.

I am so glad I met you.

I lov...

“Jane,” Mike said, his voice low and almost a physical touch. It came through perfectly in that moment, El pushing *just so* to further increase the radio’s range. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

Mike, El thought. She wished she could hold his hand, count the freckles dotting the bridge of his nose. *Mike*.

“Me too.”)

El watched the rink commercial three more times that night after she said goodbye to Mike, face so close to the television screen that Hopper kept having to tell her to move back.

“Your eyes are going to rot out of your head, kid,” he grunted as he stirred ground beef around a skillet on the stovetop. Joyce had been urging him to cook more and more, even taking him to the grocery store on occasion and shoving meat and vegetables into his cart, chuckling at his unease. She was an awful cook, barely able to fry hamburgers, but everything she made (when she was home) was fresh.

El was grateful, as she was sick of plastic dinners and mashed vegetables. She would love to never eat mushy food again in her life. Tonight, the cabin smelled like meat, frying potatoes, and grease, a delicious aroma that had her stomach growling. It reminded El of the first moment of human kindness she had ever experienced before Mike found her, from the huge man with a bald head who’d given her an entire carton of ice cream and a basket of fries to devour. She’ll always remember tasting real food for the first time, the explosion of flavors on her tongue, how good it felt to fill her stomach with something substantial after trays upon trays of apple sauce, eggs, and oatmeal. She hadn’t talked with anyone about watching him die, the fear and the sadness she’d felt, but she kept her emotions close to her chest. After all, she rarely had the words to

express them.

“Rot?” El asked distractedly as she scooted back just an inch, stroking the TV screen one last time as the image of smiling, flying teenagers faded into a McDonald’s commercial. She could just see herself one day, twirling in her very own pair of skates. The thought made her feel warm, almost excited. It was a barely explored feeling.

“You know, get sick. Sitting too close to that box isn’t good for you.”

El considered him for a moment over her shoulder. “Like...festered?”

Hopper glanced up from the meat, the frown line permanently etched between his heavy brows deepening. Like a valley, El thought, testing out a word from one of her workbooks. *Valley: a low area of land between hills or mountains, typically with a river or stream flowing through it.* “It’s ‘fester.’ Present tense. But yeah, I guess. Did Wheeler teach you that one?”

Just briefly, an image of purple hair, eyes dark with grief and anger came to El. She still dreamed of Kali, heard her screaming *Jane! Jane!* in her dreams, like a curse. Sometimes, on the nights when she felt especially cold and lonely and stuck, El dreamed she stayed with her sister. Sometimes she even killed the bad man in Chicago, watched his life drain from him with a sick sort of satisfaction sticking in her throat. But mostly, Kali watched her as she slept, eyes full of sadness and accusations, hands cupped around an electric blue butterfly. And El still longed for her, still remembered what it was like to briefly, just briefly, not be a freak. Even if she had used Papa against her, had crept into her mind like a spider, Kali was her sister. Family.

“No,” El said, folding her hands in her lap and fiddling with the threadbare sleeves of her sweatshirt. “Not Mike.”

If Hopper noticed how soft her voice was, her downcast eyes, he didn’t say. She hadn’t exactly talked to him about Kali and her friends. She’d mentioned being in Chicago when he’d asked again after the Gate was closed, said she had a sister, but hadn’t mentioned the man in his apartment, his children, the fear that battled with rage, regret, and hesitance in her gut when she’d nearly ended his life. She did not know how to talk about her *grief. Bitterness. Guilt.*

The feelings were just words to El, words that accompanied tears and nausea and nightmares.

The pan banged against the counter as Hopper slid piles of steaming meat and potatoes onto two waiting plates. He made sure to sneak lumps of cut green beans amid the beef just to get El's daily serving of vegetables in, but she didn't mind. Green beans required effort to chew them. They tasted...green, fresh. Like summer. They weren't peas.

She shuddered. *Peas*. Getting up from her position on the carpet, still too close to the television, she slumped into her seat at the table, accepting her delicious-smelling dinner with a tiny smile.

"Thank you," she said, testing out the manners Hopper insisted upon. She still didn't understand the point of them, but they seemed to make people happy, especially Hopper and Joyce, seemed to keep a thread of kindness and convenience going in conversations that El found herself liking. When her own words failed, she could always fall back on them, she supposed.

Hopper's responding smile made it worth the effort. "You're welcome." (*Welcome?* El always wondered. *Why am I welcome?*) She didn't have the energy to ask for an explanation). He nodded at the plate. "Now dig in. I want to see that plate clean."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and they both laughed, eyes meeting affectionately across the Formica.

Family.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

The next morning, El is faced with a decision.

Notes for the Chapter:

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh okay. i am not really happy with this chapter, and it seems like this story has become a legit multichap fic, BUT OH WELL. the next chapter will be mike and eleven's talk, and the next...possibly partially in max's pov. i might end up making this longer than 5 chapters, as i haven't written fic in forever, but we'll see.

thank you so much to everyone who gave me kudos and left fantastic and kind comments. i love you all. please feel free to comment more! it makes my day <3 i hope you enjoy this!

The next morning, El woke to the crackle of static, like hands crushing paper right next to her ear. She'd been dreaming about spring, fresh white and yellow daffodils growing in a field so green it was like the grass in the technicolor world of *Wizard of Oz*. She'd watched the VHS with Joyce, Jonathan, and Will a week ago and ever since, her dreams were in blinding, almost tangible color. Even the ones she had of Mike, his freckles standing out on his angular cheekbones like glittering stars.

“Jane? It’s me, Mike. You awake? Over.”

Mike, she thought happily, struggling to sit up in a tangle of sheets, quilts, and blankets, rubbing sleep from her eyes with one hand while the other reached for the radio. She was instantly close to awake, despite never having liked mornings much. The nurses in the lab used to wake her up every hour or so (in her mind, it was every time she shut her eyes. They never taught her how to read a clock) to monitor her frantic heart and draw her blood.

(Papa told her once they wanted her tired -- *exhausted*, he'd said -- to see how lack of sleep would affect her powers. Would she be more volatile then?)

She hadn't been poked with a needle in so long, she'd almost forgotten what it felt like. She couldn't see the tiny white scars along the inside of her arm anymore. It was like she was shedding her skin, making room for something new.

Gripping the Supercomm, El fell back on her pile of soft pillows, each with its own mismatching case from Joyce's house, floral to plaid to plain faded peach. She'd picked them out herself, the evening after she closed the Gate. "I'm here, Mike," she whispered into the speaker. And then, finger letting go of the button, she pressed a quick kiss to the crackling expanse of plastic. It was silly, but she always did.

Blushing even though she knew he couldn't see her, El glanced at her clock, a lumpy affair of black plastic with bright red digits and a blaring alarm: 6:35. *I slept for nine hours*, she thought. *And now I get to talk to Mike.*

Nine hours. A luxury (*the state of great comfort and extravagant living*). She'd always lived on too little sleep and bits of dreams or nightmares, like subsisting on crumbs. Now she was able to nest in blankets, to roll in her own imagination like a pleased cat. Sometimes, it was almost too much for her to bear: a bed, her own collection of quilts and pillows and soft, kissable stuffed animals. Her own room. Her own small place in the world that had windows she could open (now) and warm, familiar smells. Even after spending over a year outside the lab, under sky and inside the cabin, it was still too much.

"Hey!" Mike immediately answered, his voice so warm it felt like a blanket around El's shoulders. A cup of hot cocoa in her hands. "How did you sleep? Over."

"Good," El replied, and remembering Hopper's oft-used phrase use your words, elaborated. "I dreamt about flowers.. How did you sleep?"

Mike laughed. El had no idea what was so funny, but she loved

Mike's laugh. It was never used to mock her, but he always seemed so surprised. "That sounds like a nice dream. I slept okay. I may have found you a skating teacher, over."

Of course he did. El found herself clutching the radio to her chest, smiling like a goof at the ceiling beams. It was a common occurrence when talking to Mike, the Mike she was slowly relearning after 353 days apart. She'd known him plenty during that almost-year, known his fears, his insecurities, all the small secrets, the fervent hopes he had spilled into the radio like they were a spell that could bring her back. But it was different now that he knew she was there, listening. She had to piece him together again, bit by bit.

His voice was deeper now, and he'd grown taller and more sarcastic. (*sar-cast-ic: given to using irony. Irony: the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect. Signifies...opposite...humorous...emphatic....* To El, language was like that song Joyce had played once on her battered old turntable: *and if you go chasing rabbits, and you know you're going to fall...* words bled into words, and she always had to look up more than one in a sentence as they chased each other's tails across the well-explored but rusty pathways of her mind. Sometimes, she got lost in her dictionary and her thesaurus, wondering just how many words existed, just how many she would have to know just to *live*. The thought was both daunting and exciting. There would always be something to learn).

He was warm with her, even moreso than he'd been when they'd first met, his smiled tinged with an affection that brought heat to her cheeks, but his humor had a bite to it, an edge that wasn't there before. He was no longer the overeager boy who had shown her his toys in his bedroom, who had been so full of nervous energy. He was growing, changing so quickly that sometimes, in the cabin with her soap operas and notebooks, she felt like she was trudging to keep up.

It was one of the reasons why, she supposed, she felt strangely drawn to those...*rollerskates*. Nearly everything else in her life, from her nosebleeds to Eggos to Jim Croce had been introduced to her by someone else. But this? This felt like hers. Felt like something that made her...older. Changing. Like she really was becoming a person. A person with...what was the word? Hobbies. Interests. Complexity.

fiery hair, who had slipped into El's place when she was gone, as if she were easily replaced. Like a broken television.

It didn't help that every time they'd met, she recognized the same hurt in Max's eyes that she felt within herself when she thought of the year she'd spent behind wood and shadow, lost to her friends. When she'd felt like that Halloween costume she'd chosen, the sheet she'd cut holes into. A ghost.

She didn't know the words to describe the feeling, but it still ached inside her like a smarting wound. She couldn't talk to Mike or Hopper or Nancy or Joyce about it because when she tried, when she dug inside her for one word, just one to describe it, there was only silence and confusion.

But maybe, she thought. Maybe, if Max knew how to skate...if she even wanted to teach her...she'd have to explain why she'd been so... mean. A real mouthbreather. Maybe there was a way to talk about it...how afraid she was that Mike had forgotten her. How angry she'd felt when she watched him smile at Max and hold her hand. El had heard him call out to her every night during those 353 days they were apart, but Max represented all the loneliness and frustration she'd felt, watching her friend smile at someone else when she felt so sad, so lost and alone.

Maybe she could try with Mike first. Maybe Mike knew the word for that strange and messy combination of anger and sadness.

"Yeah, Max. She-"

El cut him off again, taking a deep, nervous breath to steel herself. "I saw you two. Together."

Mike's voice cut through the static without pause, sharp and surprised. "What? Together? When?"

He forgot Walkie Etiquette, El thought. She couldn't help the tiny smile curling around her mouth. She constantly surprised Mike, and it was always at least a little fun.

"Last year. At...the school."

"You came to Hawkins Middle? Was it in the gym? Um, over." His voice was so loud that Eleven had to turn down the volume dial. Surprisingly, he didn't sound angry, although El knew she'd done a bad thing to Max. There was a strange note of happiness, eagerness in his voice.

"...yes."

A small pause followed, and then Mike's voice exploded in a rush of static. El jumped and actually dropped the Supercomm this time. It rolled off the bed, striking the rug-covered floor with a muffled clatter.

"I knew it! I knew you were there!" Mike called from the floor, but El didn't have the heart to smile at the pure joy in his voice.

She lowered her chin, gathering that strange energy that always lay coiled inside her like a snake. She slowly unfurled her clenched fist, palm up, and the Supercomm rose from the floor, briefly hovering over the bed before landing lightly in her outstretched hand. Mike was still crowing excitedly (*I knew it! I wasn't going nuts!*) and her stomach leapt in response, her palms suddenly clammy and slippery around the radio.

Wait. He had known? Had he sensed her, the way she always knew, in the back of her brain, when he was near? Did he know what she'd done?

"...E-Jane? You there? Over."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me it was you? Over."

"Couldn't," she replied nervously, reverting back to her old one-word answers. Her voice was a small, trembling thing. She fiddled with the pile of quilts and comforters she was tucked under, twisting fabric around her fingers in a sharp coil. Her knees almost immediately began to rise, wanting to tuck themselves to her chest. She knew rejection. She'd felt it a million times, from Hopper's constant nos to Lucas' judgement and Axel's sneers. Once, long ago, she'd even seen it

in Mike's eyes, heard it in his voice. Hearing it again would be more than she could bear. "Wasn't safe."

He paused for breath and silence stretched. El clenched her blankets harder, her hands shaking with the effort. She guessed, hoped, he had realized that this wasn't something they should be discussing over the radio, a connection that could be monitored. She also hoped, fervently, to the point of an ache in her chest, that he wasn't angry with her. She'd endured many things in her thirteen years, and endured them well compared to the alternative. Mike's anger wasn't one of them.

And sure enough,

"Can I visit you today?! Over." There was no hint of anger in his voice.

Yes, she wanted to scream. *Yes yes yes*

El suddenly felt warm, like she'd just slid into a bath. It had been so long since she'd last seen Mike outside of the Void, heard his voice without a background of static. Hopper would surely let her. It was...she glanced at the calendar tacked over her bedside table, a collection of photos of various horses, from Clydesdales striding over beaches to elegant black Arabians leaping over bushes ripe with berries. A gift mailed to Hopper from Aunt Becky. *Sunday*.

She loved that calendar. She crossed off the days now, more as a measure of keeping time than marking its passing like a prisoner. Otherwise she had no idea. Time was never a consequential thing to Eleven, a real and tangible concept. She'd slipped through it as a child, never knowing what a minute or an hour, let alone a month was. She never had anything to look forward to, anything to be eager for. Life was to be feared.

Now, it lay before her in a kaleidoscope of endless possibilities. She was still in hiding of course, but there was the lingering promise of more, of freedom. Hopper had shown her her birth certificate and the accompanying Social Sec-ur-i-ty card, as he'd called it, and told her she was real now, an *actual person*. She could eventually go to school when things were safe again, maybe have a job, walk through town,

breathe in fresh air every single day, even live outside in the noisy, dirty, beautiful world.

(And she had someone to guide her through it. Someone who, despite making mistakes, told her he was *sorry* and made an effort to make her life better. Someone who still fed her and taught her and ruffled her hair like she *mattered*.)

El glanced back at the calendar. *Sunday*. Hopper worked today. The little red circle around the number 29 indicated a double shift in her color-coded system. (Yellow for regular workdays, red for doubles. Purple for Nancy days, glittery blue for Joyce. Pink for Steve's babysitting sessions.) Which meant sixteen hours of being by herself. Homework, reading, soaps, seemingly endless boredom. If she were lucky, Mrs. Byers or Steve would stop by at some point to see if she was still alive and not just eating whipped cream out of a can. Surely, Hopper would let Mike visit. Right?

Please please please, her stuttering heart chanted in a rough staccato.

"Jane? Over."

El had forgotten to respond again. She tended to get lost in her thoughts, thinking she'd somehow conveyed them with her voice. She sighed.

"I'm here," she said into the Supercomm, sweaty fingers slipping on the button. The thought of possibly seeing Mike made her insides fill with trembling butterflies. "I'll ask."

"Great—"

But. "Wait. What about...school? Will you come after 3 1 5?"

"No Jane," Mike replied softly. El could hear the affection in his voice just as clearly as if he were in the room with her, gently holding her hand. Was it possible for your heart to explode? she wondered. "It's Sunday, which is part of the weekend. I don't have any school. Over."

"Oh. Good."

"Yeah. So will you call me if he says yes?" Mike asked eagerly.

“Over.”

“Yes. I will call you right after.” El stared hard at the Supercomm, grinning like a silly fool. She didn’t think it was possible to feel this happy.

Mike always looked forward to talking with her, always openly professing his excitement without any shame, a constant echo of her own. She’d never been someone people...thought of. It made her heart feel tight, her knees soft, like jelly. To be the person Mike Wheeler looked forward to.

(Sometimes, after hours of whispering to him in the butter-warm glow of her bedside lamp, Irene Cara playing softly on her clock radio, she hoped with all of her small and untidy heart that she would know him forever, that they would spend their years *together*. Lying on top of different bedspreads, in different beds, hands held tight as they told each other their secrets. She knew from movies, Hopper, Mrs Byers, and a slightly-bitter Steve Harrington that...these things...weren’t usually forever. Crushes came and went like the seasons in these fragile years, but...Mike felt stable to Eleven. Like a constant. Her own personal sun. She could grow and change and develop, but he would always be there, and she would always be in his orbit.)

“Great,” Mike replied instantly, as Eleven’s thoughts took over again. She *heard* the smile in his voice. “I’ll be looking forward to it. I can’t wait to see you. Hopefully Hopper will let us this this time. Over.”

“Me too,” El whispered, her lips pressed close to the speaker. She began to disentangle herself from her hoard of blankets. “I’ll go ask him now. Bye Mike.”

She paused only to slap the antenna closed, and then she was tumbling out of bed, not even waiting for his response.

El padded to Hopper’s room on bare feet, already freezing despite the layers of long sleeved shirts and sweatshirts she slept in, regretting

forgetting socks in her haste. Mornings were cold in the cabin, the fire having died down in the night. Hopper didn't like leaving their several space heaters on, preferring not to wake up with the house burnt down around their ears.

Still, El hated the cold.

The doorknob squealed under her fingers, and she winced at the touch of frigid brass. She nudged the door open softly with her toe and stepped in, immediately greeted with darkness she could almost touch. While she preferred to wake with the sun on her face, her curtains cracked just so, Hopper slept in pitch black. It was just one of their many differences. He was cautious, while she was reckless. He didn't mind the cold, she couldn't stand it to the point of panic (starving in it for forty days could do that to a person). He reveled in the dark, preferring nights to mornings, wincing at the sun. El had been kept in the shadows for too long and craved the light like a struggling plant.

She managed to hold off the slight panic biting at the base of her mind (*Papa! No! Papa!*) as she tilted her chin at the lamp she knew sat on his bedside table. She sighed as the light flicked on, bathing the room in its dull but warm glow.

(She never bothered searching for light switches with her hands when the cabin was dark, preferring not to open the boxes of memories she kept tucked tightly away. She knew she'd have to open them eventually, unpack their contents, organize them; she wouldn't have a safe space to use her powers forever. But she had a year. So many things could be done in a year.)

Hopper was snoring, tangled in blankets, his face obscured by several pillows. El crept closer, suddenly hit with the familiar smells of stale cigarettes, black coffee, and sweat mixed with the remnants of a slightly woodsy cologne. Her nose wrinkled. Three cups of forgotten coffee sat on his bedside table, a fly lazily buzzing around the closest, a plain white ceramic mug decorated with a smoking rooster (a gift from thrift store-addicted Flo, Hopper had told her the first time she saw it. He never looked a gift horse in the mouth if that gift horse was a coffee mug he didn't have to buy). Hopper had the illusion of neatness. They both did the dishes each night, alternating who

washed and who dried. He kept a tally of chores, and the cabin was usually spotless, neatly swept and tidied at the end of each day. But El found that in his room, it was a different story altogether.

She'd found moldy donuts in his desk, chip crumbs between his blankets, and countless cups of congealed black coffee on his nightstand when she came to tidy his room each afternoon (even though he'd told her not to). And he complained when Steve left his empty bowls of Doritos in the living room. Silly.

Sighing, El came to a stop right beside his bed, taking a moment to watch his chest rise in a mighty snore before she bent to poke him in the ribs.

"Hey," she said, her voice loud and echoing. She decided to test out Steve's favorite word. "Wake up, shithead!"

Hopper startled so completely that all of his pillows flew off his face. One nearly careened into her head until she tilted her chin, floating it gently to the floor. His blankets slipped off the edge of the bed, landing in a puddle on the rug.

Hopper struggled to a seated position way faster than she thought a man of his size could move, looking about the room wildly, a bit of drool at the corner of his mouth, his cropped hair wild. He still wore his jeans, a thermal t-shirt, and one sock.

El pressed her fist to her lips, trying not to laugh.

"What the hell?" Hopper whirled on her and then immediately jumped, as if he'd seen a ghost. El was reminded of Halloween a few months ago, when she'd dressed in that sheet, painstakingly cut the holes, hope like something trapped and scrambling in her chest. "Jesus."

Running a hand through his close-cropped hair, Hopper slumped back against the pillows, glancing at his alarm clock, a boxy black model exactly like El's.

"...El, it's 6:45. You know, unless we are in imminent danger..."

“Imm-in-ent: something about to happen,” El promptly spoke over him. “So, about to die.”

“Yes,” Hopper replied, nodding. He was just as gruff as he always was, like a bad-tempered bear, but every time she defined a new word his eyebrows lifted just a bit and the corners of his mouth twitched into half a smile. “About to die. Unless we are about to die, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t wake me up with your bony little finger in my ribs.”

El swallowed a laugh again, this time with more difficulty. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Hopper replied, rubbing his temples. He was working on gentleness, honing it the same way he did wood when he sat down with sticks and a knife on the porch. *Whittling*, he called it. Making something from nothing. “Now what’s the issue?”

El set her chin and clenched her fists. She’d asked a variation of this question every day. Even knowing she had a year left in the cabin, a year until she could leave, she still asked every single day at breakfast: *when can my friends come? I want to see my friends. Can I see Mike today? Can I see Nancy today? Steve? What about Mrs. Byers? What about Will and Lucas and Dustin? I want to see them.* (The broken look on Hopper’s face always twisted her heart, but she had to. She *had to*). She wouldn’t take no for an answer this time. This time, Mike coming over meant making amends. It meant maybe, just maybe, *rollerskates*. “I want Mike to visit today.”

She prepared herself for a battle, a negotiation, already collecting her terms. She would clean the toilets for weeks without telekinesis. She would polish the windows with that gross smelling blue stuff and finish her workbooks and this time actually vacuum under the couch cushions instead of just on top of them and and...

Hopper let out a heavy sigh, hand over his eyes. “Okay, okay. Fine.”

“What?”

Shoving the one remaining pillow off him, Hopper threw his legs over the side of the bed, getting up a groan. El backed up to give him

some space, staring at him in shock. "I said okay, kid. I told you I wasn't going to keep you from your friends."

"You really mean it?" Excitement (mixed with nerves. She'd have to tell Mike all about what happened at the school if he came over, then...saying sorry. To Max) began to bubble in her stomach. "Really?"

"Yeah yeah," Hopper grunted his way to the bathroom. "That Wheeler kid's been down at the station every day for the last week. If I don't get a break, I'll put him in lockup."

The bathroom door closed behind him with a decisive *click*.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

an interlude with eleven and mike before their big discussion about max.

Notes for the Chapter:

ahhhhhh i am so sorry, this fic is going to kill us all! there is no discussion between mike and el here, just a few bits and pieces in both of their povs that ends with mike at the door. next chapter, they will have their discussion. and next chapter: MAX! IF MY BRAIN COOPERATES. SO SORRY. apparently my writing muse is going for FRIENDSHIP: SLOW EFFIN BURN

let me know if you hate it in the comments and definitely follow me on tumblr: alittlerunaway! love you all and thank you so much for the support so far. we will get to the important bits at some point, i promise!

you are
as i need
water

valentine, tom pickard

Eleven's cold feet skidded on the wood floor as she raced back to her room, her sharp squeals of pure excitement echoing amidst the ceiling beams. From the bathroom, she distantly heard Hopper's loud groan as he switched the shower on.

She was so used to losing, to gathering her arguments the way a child would collect flowers in a field, only to have them blown away by an errant breeze. Victory was a new feeling, exploding like excitement in her gut, sending shivers down her spine. It was like a combination of finding there *was* one last Eggo sitting in the freezer when you

thought the box was empty, and...a kiss. It was rather like a kiss, Eleven thought. The moment before Mike's lips chose hers, when her stomach held a herd of butterflies.

(*"Fun fact,"* Dustin had told her once, a few days after she closed the Gate and the world was slowly winding down like a music box just before the crank ran out and the song skidded to a halt, *"A group of butterflies is called a KALEIDOSCOPE. Cool huh?"* he gave her one of his newly signature toothy grins, and she couldn't help grinning back.)

A kaleidoscope. A kaleidoscope of butterflies.

(Eleven found she adored getting her own way.)

Slamming open her door, she scampered to the Supercomm, jerking up the antenna with a bit too much force.

"Mike?" she called, her voice trembling with the force of her emotion. "Mike are you there?" She reached inside herself, gave a bit of tug like pulling a thread loose, and concentrated on the signal spreading, snaking its way to his house, with its pretty shutters and neat little mailbox labeled *The Wheelers*.

"Jane!" He answered immediately, not even stammering this time. But the name still felt foreign to El, as if it belonged to a separate part of her she hadn't quite met yet. She clutched the radio and fell back onto her unmade bed, arms outstretched, bouncing lightly on her pillows. She gazed happily at the ceiling.

"Yes, it's me!" she said. "He said yes! You can come over!"

"Wow, that's great!" Mike replied, and El didn't think it was possible to smile so much her cheeks hurt. She hadn't smiled much in her life, but

She began planning their visit, glossing over the difficult discussion she knew she had to have with him. Maybe they could watch *Fame* together. Or make peanut butter Eggo sandwiches with the M&Ms Hopper brought back last night. Or read *The Hobbit* together. She'd started it three days ago. She could offer him a drink (*we have OJ* or

skim milk...what else), show him her room, the cut out paper snowflakes she'd made despite her hatred of the real thing. (She'd seen them in the school's...gym and asked Nancy how to make them during one of her visits. They were picking bits of white paper out of their hair and off their clothes for hours after, smiling at each other as they taped the snowflakes to her wall. Part of her bedroom looked like it was papered in lace now). Maybe his hand would even touch hers, their pinkies lightly caressing. Maybe he would gaze into her eyes again, like he did under the Christmas lights and streamers at the Snow Ball, his smile so soft it was like biting into a sweet for the first time, that same kind of satisfaction.

...and maybe...just maybe...he'd know the words to describe her feelings about Max.

"...maybe we can watch a movie together. Or play some games! Want me to bring comics? I have X-Men 101, with Jean Grey! I told you about her at the Snow Ball?"

Comics? El shrugged before realizing he couldn't see her. "Okay," she said. "What time?"

The clock radio blinked 7:07 from her bedside table.

"Is 9 okay? That gives us both time to have breakfast first! Or I can bring breakfast with me, or come around lunch. Whatever you want is okay with me."

Mike had said that before, *whatever you want is okay with me*. He always gave her a choice. It confused El sometimes, making choices. She'd rarely had that option. Even Hopper restricted choices to *peas or those tiny, unnerving square carrots?*

"9," she replied softly. "9 is good."

"Great. That's um. That's great. I really can't wait to see you.", and then, his voice so warm it buzzed along El's spine, giving her the shivers, "I'm...I'm glad you're back."

Eleven's eyes shut. There was something about this thing with Mike called *more than friendship*, how eager he always was to see her, to

answer her calls on his Supercomm, that touched her.

“Me too,” she said, strangely teary eyed. “Me too.”

An hour later, after Hopper was showered, dressed, and sitting with his legs crossed and newspaper unfurled at the table, drinking coffee for breakfast, El kept glancing nervously at the clock on the microwave.

8:03.

She glared at the little green numbers, willing the digits to change.

8:03.

Time was rude, she thought, already waiting in her overalls and striped shirt, her hair a riotous mess of curls, for the *damn* Eggos to be toasted already.

She was slowly figuring out that everything in life involved some sort of wait.

She could eat Eggos straight out of the box and completely frozen with no problem (she'd done it once in the woods, sitting under a log with the waffles clenched in her scuffed and dirty fists. Every noise, every crackle of leaves or snap of branches had meant *bad men, bad men found me run*. She'd stuffed herself until her stomach ached and her head felt caught in the clouds). However, Hopper insisted that if she ate trash for breakfast, (she gave him her best death glare. He'd raised an eyebrow in response), she had to toast it and add fruit or something first. Like peanut butter, which Eleven preferred to just eat straight out of the jar with just her fingers and a gummy smile.

A huge yawn escaped as she stared at her blurred reflection in the toaster, her jaw clicking a bit from the force. *Come on come on I'm hungry come onnn* she thought, bouncing lightly but urgently on the balls of her feet.

“Cover your mouth!” Hopper called from the next room. She had no

idea how he knew *every single time* she didn't refill the toilet paper roll, cover her mouth when she sneezed or whatever else, but she could have sworn he had his own version of powers. Rolling her eyes, she loudly slapped her hand over her mouth as she yawned again.

"Thank you!" was Hopper's immediate response.

And finally, the toaster popped.

Eleven jumped, immediately juggling the Eggos onto a plate so she didn't burn her fingers, bouncing them back and forth between her hands. Grabbing a banana from the basket on the counter and the accompanying jar of peanut butter, she traipsed to the table and plopped down, blowing an errant curl out of her eyes.

It only took five seconds for her to devour both waffles, but at least the clock read 8:06 now.

Hopper finally left twenty minutes later, grumbling his way out the door and down the steps, clutching a banana El had spent two minutes levitating next to his head, incessantly poking him in the ear with it until he surrendered. She was determined that if he forced her to eat things like brussels sprouts and dinner before dessert, that he would join her in her misery.

"Fine, dammit," he'd finally muttered, a soft smile hidden in his burgeoning beard. He kissed her curls, ruffling them with a hand that fit completely over her skull, told her to *Behave* and banged his way out of the cabin. El smiled, touching her hair where he'd kissed her, and turned to the television.

Which was where she was perched now, station changed to the local news, which played soap operas from the early morning to the late afternoon, usually accompanied by a bevy of commercials. She hoped, as she scooted too close to the screen, an old afghan of Joyce's wrapped around her shoulders, she'd see the commercial again before Mike arrived.

And sure enough, she did. It played right after the local weather report, scrolling across the screen in almost blinding color.

come on down kids one and all...we have free drink specials until last call at ROLLER KINGDOM!

The teenagers were back, four of them, all flying hair and shining leather skates. Eleven scooted so close to the screen her eyes were almost pressed to the glass. She could kiss the brown haired boy dancing on his skates, twirling one way and then the other, if she wanted to, but she only had eyes for the girl with the thick, dark, curly hair. She watched her every time the commercial aired, with her perfectly straight teeth and striped turtleneck. She glided across the white floor (she reminded herself to ask Mike what it was called), her hair a halo, her smile so wide El could feel it, right between her ribs. She'd never, in her entire life, been that happy. Not even when she'd stepped through the door of the Byers' house and seen Mike for the first time outside of the Void in nearly a year. She knew the girl was pretending to smile, twirling on one foot, the other held out long and straight behind her, but skating looked so fun. Exactly as Mike described it, *like flying*. El wanted to fly. More than anything, she didn't want a nosebleed after.

Something jumped in her chest, and she realized with a sudden bout of nerves, that it was her heart.

If Max was the only one who could teach her, would she even want to?

After imagining her visit with Mike all through breakfast and Hopper's reading of the newspaper, a soft little smile on her face the entire time, she was actually a bit scared now. And so nervous. Her finger trembled lightly in her mouth as she frantically chewed on her index fingernail, the Roller Kingdom commercial fading unnoticed into a dog food ad.

8:47.

What would she say to him? How would she explain herself? What if she told him she'd knocked Max off her skateboard and he didn't like her anymore?

What if-

Knockknock KNOCK knockknockknock

Eleven turned to stare at the door, finger still in her mouth. *Shit* she thought, trying out the word. It was strangely satisfying. Her heart, beating so fast it was a fluttering hummingbird in her chest, sank to her stomach. He was early. He had been the first time he'd visited, arriving twenty three minutes before 5pm, to Hopper's amusement. But now. Did he just want to get this over with? What if-

"El?" Mike's unmistakable voice, as familiar as Hopper's despite how much deeper it had gotten in the year they'd been apart, floated through the door. There was a brief pause, and then he knocked again.

El breathed slowly in through her nose, then out through her mouth the way Hopper had taught her after nightmares had left her gasping and drowning in the endless hours before dawn, then tilted her chin toward the door.

A soft groan of metal on metal, and it swung open.

7:07 that morning, the Wheelers' residence

Mike set his Supercomm down, his hands sweaty and clammy and shaking all at once. *Hopper said yes. Hopper said yes.* He didn't think it would happen, even after camping out at the police station every day this week at 3:50, as quickly as he could bike over from the Middle School.

(Time meant something to Mike now. He never thought it would when he was younger outside of 5pm for dinner 7:30am for school and so forth, before 3 1 5. Before he'd biked home to find the strange girl he'd taken in pacing under the electrical lines, staring so intently and desperately at his watch, as if his absence meant something to her. Before he'd realized that she'd crawled within the chamber his heart had become, had set up a home there. Even after she'd disappeared and he'd felt like the door to that chamber had slammed

shut, he still recited the time when he radioed her. Every night. He had to let her know that even while time passed, his desperation to find her, to tell her she was not alone, did not.)

The Party had gone with him the first few times, even Max despite El's strange coldness toward her. Sat in the lobby staring Flo down like the miniature army they were until she called Hopper. *Jim, those kids are back again. Can you deal with them this time please?* Even whisper-yelled at his impassive face along with Mike, telling him he couldn't keep Eleven locked up forever.

She'll turn into Gollum, Chief! GOLLUM. Do you want that to happen? (Kid, slow down. Who the hell is Gollum?)

But they'd gradually fallen off the bandwagon, shaking their heads sadly at him from the AV room or the bike rack when he asked if they were coming.

"Nah," Dustin had said yesterday as Mike yanked the lock from his bike, glaring around at them. "I think this is something you and Hopper have to talk about. We're not helping, man."

What the hell was that supposed to mean anyway? It had been *three weeks* with no contact outside of the Supercomm. Three weeks of her by herself out in the woods in that cabin, probably wondering if they'd forgotten about her. And this was something he had to do by himself?

But...apparently he'd succeeded. Had the accusatory look he'd leveled at Hopper done its job? Had the silent message he'd sent him sunk in?

You owe me.

353 days.

I thought she was dead.

Mike set to work in a furious hurry, his heart nearly pounding out of his chest, not even acknowledging if his sweater was clean or if his khakis were ironed as he threw them on. (He didn't realize he'd chosen a dirty Christmas sweater with a fair isle pattern of white reindeer prancing across the center AND put it on inside out until he

was standing in the cabin, heavy winter coat taken off, El just...looking at him.)

He had a bag packed just for this when he was still fervently hoping it would happen, stuffed with movies, books, a few games, and a recent edition: an absurdly soft stuffed koala he'd bought El yesterday with this week's pocket money. He hadn't been allowed to see her for Christmas. She'd gone to the Byers' and Hopper had thought it would look suspicious if the entire monster hunting party had descended on the house again, but she had received his gifts and radioed him about them that night. But still, he'd seen the koala in the window of a store in town and knew she had to have it.

(Something inside him still trembled when he thought about her soft voice over the Supercomm. *Thank you, Mike* she'd whispered. *I love your gifts.* He'd gotten her a copy of *Fame*, apparently her favorite movie, several books wrapped in brown paper, and a necklace Nancy had helped him with, a delicate circlet of silver links with a dangling charm: her initial, or at least the initial of his nickname for her: E. He'd kept a tiny M for later, much later, when she was a free and in school with him and he could try to tell her exactly what she meant to him. So...not much, really, but she'd loved them. Loved.)

And now...now he could give it to her.

The door slammed open and he rushed into the hall, long arms tangled in a strange combination of his backpack straps and jacket sleeves. He tumbled more than ran down the stairs, only pausing for breath to actually *take off his backpack* and throw it on the ground to free himself.

It dawned on him, as he zipped his coat up and threw his bag over his shoulder, walking to the door without breakfast, a hat, or even shoes (and an hour or so early despite casually telling her they could both eat first, but who cares, right?), that he had no idea how to get to the cabin. The few times he'd been out there, Joyce or Jonathan had driven. But maybe...

“NANCY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Neither of his parents came stumbling out of the dining room, their

faces etched with horror and reprimand (probably both off doing something, as they often were these days), but Nancy's voice echoed from the kitchen, "WHAT????"

She was standing in front of the toaster fully dressed and groomed, a jar of peanut butter by her elbow, glaring at him when he rushed in. She rolled her eyes a bit when he slid on the floor in his socked feet, almost falling before he caught himself on the counter.

"What the hell, Mike?"

"Do you know how to get to the cabin?" the words exploded out of him with such force that Nancy took a step back. "Hopper said I could visit El today."

"Jesus," Nancy replied, pressing a hand to her chest. The toaster popped and she whipped two golden slices of Wonder Bread onto a waiting plate. "I thought there was another apocalypse or someone had died or something. Don't scare me like that."

As she spread a thick smear of peanut butter over each slice of toast (*disgusting*), not answering his question, Mike frantically bounced on his toes, ready to rip his hair out. He just...he had to get there. He had to see her. He finally had the okay and they were just...*wasting time*.

"Well????"

"Well what?"

"Do you know," he panted, eyes narrowing, aching from the force of his glare, "How to get...to the damn...cabin?"

Nancy looked primly up at him, then, biting her lip, looked back down at her Wonder Bread.

"No."

Mike exploded, arms flailing. His hand smacked into the wall and a sharp bite of pain rocketed up his forearm. "NO?!? WHAT DO YOU MEAN NO?"

“Jonathan does,” she said, talking right over him as he’d never even spoken. “He’s coming to pick me up in like, fifteen minutes. Since Hopper says it’s okay, he can drive you there.”

Mike just stared at her.

“Close your mouth,” Nancy said, neatly placing one slice of bread on top of the other. She cut them into perfectly symmetrical diagonal segments and placed the knife in the sink.

And as she passed him, heading to the table, “Your breath stinks, by the way. You should probably eat something and brush your teeth, you’re making me gag.”

Mike didn’t quite have the heart to flip her off.

Mike memorized every landmark, every dip in the road, every oddly shaped tree on the journey to the cabin, intent on retracing it on his bike the next time Hopper agreed. (Or, in an emergency, without Hopper’s okay. He owed Mike, afterall.) His heart gave great leaping bounds in his chest like a wild animal and his knees bounced incessantly to the clanging of the Clash on the radio as they drove along, Jonathan and Nancy speaking quietly to each other up front. He felt like his skin was too hot and too tight, like he was about to tremble out of it. Every time Jonathan tapped his hand on the steering wheel to the music, his eye twitched.

Soon, he’d see El. He’d hold her hand and look into her eyes, so dark and so filled with sweetness and ferocity. Maybe they’d sit next to each other, their thighs pressed close, her head of thick curls tucked between his neck and shoulder (who knew her hair would be curly? It had surprised Mike when he’d first seen it, but they were beautiful. She’d been beautiful without any hair, and she was beautiful now with a full head of it, wild and springing). The real reason for his visit, her presence in the school last year, her hesitance and the sadness in her voice when she’d said *I saw you two*, her general disdain and ambivalence toward Max, was momentarily forgotten.

They could even play Hopper's battered old copy of Monopoly. That took forever, especially with two people. They'd have something to occupy them for hours.

When Jonathan *finally* squealed to a stop on a hazy, dead end road, Mike barely paused to listen to his instructions before he tumbled out of the car, yelling a "thanks" over his shoulder as he plowed through the trees, branches catching at his face, snagging on his backpack. Nancy yelled something at his back, probably calling him an asshole, but Mike paid her no mind.

He only *just* made it over the tripwire before he was clattering up the steps, panting and heaving for breath.

Finally.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike assures El she is unforgettable.

Notes for the Chapter:

UM GET READY FOR SOME TEETH ROTTING
FLUFF. Next chapter?
MAXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

*i do not want to have you
to fill the empty parts of me
i want to be full on my own
i want to be so complete
i could light a whole city
and then
i want to have you
'cause the two of
us combined
could set it on fire*

- rupi kaur

They collided. It was the only way to describe it, like errant stars or soft springtime thunder. El was off the couch and across the rug to him in the span of two heartbeats, all trepidation forgotten when his scuffed Converse sneakers came into view, newer but exact twins of the ones she still wore. Mike's arms were open and waiting, patient and urgent all at the same time.

She practically crashed into them, her curly head hitting his collarbone, his heavy down coat cold beneath her cheek. He stumbled back a bit and she clung to him, her fingers making claws in the back of his jacket.

She couldn't hear his heartbeat through the goose down, couldn't feel the soft warmth of his sweater, and she wanted more. Wanted to be tucked against him like something treasured, to crawl inside his skin and burrow into his heart like she used to huddle under the blanket

fort in his basement. She couldn't quite describe how much she'd missed him, the scent of his shampoo (like rain and everything clean), the feel of his hands brushing through her hair. There was no contest between his voice on the radio and his actual presence, the *feeling* of him, his touch.

And she'd been so nervous when he'd knocked on the door. Strange how all of that, the hours of doubt last night, the terror she'd felt when she'd imagined facing a rejection from him faded when he was actually there.

(But...she hadn't told him yet, had she? Her hands tightened further around his coat as she stood on tip toes to get closer, her chin pressing tightly into his scarf.)

Mike had opened his arms without thinking as the door creaked open and he stepped over the threshold. Eleven was practically a blur in his periphery before she hit him, sending him stumbling back but still smiling, grinning so hard it nearly split his face. He had a good four or so inches on her now, would probably have more as the months and years (he could have *years* with her) wore on, and her head rested just below his neck, her curls sticking up just so they brushed his nose if he leaned down. She smelled like vanilla, like Irish Spring soap and bit of faint tobacco, like freshly cut wood and cotton blankets with a bit of waffles and syrup on her breath.

It was intoxicating in a way he hadn't experienced before. A year ago, he hadn't noticed what she'd smelled like, how hoarsely sweet her voice was, how she felt against him (her arms and the curve of her cheek like home), how she looked at him with those earnest eyes. All he knew then was someone needed his help, someone sweet with a cutting edge, someone like a superhero (a superhero needed *his* help), someone who looked so pretty in a pink dress or a yellow t-shirt or his own pair of sweats that it nearly sent his heart beating straight out of his chest. Back then, he'd mostly thought about her in a cursory fashion. *Pretty. Sweet. Badass. Sad. Must help. She saved me. Wow.* But over the subsequent year, the 353 days the Party had spent not knowing if she was lost and cold in another dimension or...not around anymore, he'd had nothing but his memories for company. He'd spent those days, that long almost-year daydreaming of her, trying to remember her voice, wondering what her eyes would hold

when (if) he saw her again, and in the process, Eleven had introduced Mike to that strange and painful thing called his heart.

(It was like he'd been living behind some sort of curtain before. Now he knew nothing but the way she made him feel, the looks she gave him and the instant response his heart gave, that *boom boom boom* that echoed in his ears and at his wrists as it picked up speed. The million and one soft hitches of her voice over the Supercomm.)

"Mike," El gasped. Her fists tightened on his jacket, her voice low and choked with tears.

"El," Mike said, against her sweet smelling hair.

They stayed like that for a long time, two children with hearts too big for their bodies.

After several long and silent moments, El and Mike separated just a bit, their legs and torsos still touching, their faces inches apart.

"I missed you," El said simply, a frown etched between her brows.

"I've tried to come every day," Mike replied. His expression was so predictably earnest (*earnest* she thought. *having qualities of depth and firmness*), exactly what El had pictured during every radioed conversation, every description he'd given her of something new and unexplored. *You'll love Star Wars....We can go to the movies the first weekend you're out....The aurora borealis is this amazing light show in the night sky, all different colors....They make you feel like you're flying. It's called skating.* Despite his rapidly growing body, his deepening voice, the sharpening of his features, he still looked at her the same way way. Like he had so many secrets to share and she was the one person he wanted to tell them to.

"The entire Party has. Everyone, even Max. We sat in the police station for *hours* trying to get Hopper to change his mind."

"Max?" El felt like her heart had stopped, only to be wound up and restarted again, like a toy.

"...Dustin distracted Flo yesterday and we all snuck into his office

when he was on break....” Mike’s rambling cut off. “What?”

“You said Max came.”

Mike let go of El to run one still-gloved hand through his hair, only to realize he was still wearing his stocking hat. El couldn’t resist her shaky smile. She released her claw-grip on his coat and took his hand in hers, not quite warm yet. Slowly, almost reverently, she began to slide the glove from his fingers, her own just barely trembling with nerves.

They were both silent. Mike’s head was bent to watch her work, his freckled cheeks flushed, his lips soundlessly mouthing her name.

El’s fingers, warm from the fire and the blanket and the space heaters running at full blast, felt an electric thrill when the last inch or so of black suede left Mike’s hand, revealing his icy palm, callused from bike rides and holding a pencil, from his continued tinkering with electronics that he loved to tell her about over the radio, his voice so full of excitement that it made her feel excited too, and his long fingers with their blunt, clean, square cut nails that held hers with such gentleness. Her heart felt full as she looked down at that hand, the hand that had held so much out to her in the time since they’d met.

Clothes.

Food. (*Eggos*.)

Friendship.

Knowledge. (Dancing. Promises. Star Wars. Dinosaurs. Radios. Dimensions. Aurora Borealis.)

And something else she couldn’t quite name. Something she didn’t have the words to describe that made her feel like her insides were dancing. Something that made Mike’s face the first thing she saw in her mind when she woke up each morning and the last thing she focused on, drifting and smiling, before she fell asleep.

So much. Even if he were angry with her after she told him about Max and the board and the school, even if he didn’t want to be her

friend anymore, she'd always remember the feeling of his fingers, slick and warm as they grasped hers. What he'd given her.

She slowly removed his other glove for him, peeling it back, gently touching the very center of his palm, stroking her finger outward over the middle of his index finger and all the lines like paths traversing the soft-but-rough skin there. Mike gasped, his brows lifting in surprise, and she watched his lips twitch in a smile.

Before he could say anything, she dropped his gloves on the floor and reached up, straining on her toes, to tug the hat from his head.

Mike laughed.

"Thanks," he said, his hand turning over in hers so he could intertwine their fingers. His heart was galloping in his chest this time, banging so hard against his sternum and pulse points, so loud in his ears that he could almost swear El heard it. (he knew hearts didn't beat directly against sternums, that they didn't beat at any decibel the human ear could detect, but it *felt* like it. All of his scientific knowledge, of his *nerdy bullshit* tended to fade to the background when he felt things for El. When her delicate fingertips, soft and so warm, touched his skin, when she traced the lines across his fingers or touched his freckles or pulled lightly on his hair like she'd done during the few interludes they'd had since the Gate. It was all too much, being touched with reverence).

She was surprised to hear he sounded breathless. (Neither of them realized that their hearts beat just as fast, just as loud, just as hard, at the same time. Neither of them realized they matched.)

"You're welcome."

(*Manners.*)

El had shut and locked the door and Mike had taken off his coat ("Mike, your sweater's inside out." "...oh. OH. *Shit.*" ... "Are those reindeer?", bundling all of his winter gear along with his backpack on a ragged armchair in the corner, when she remembered he had

mentioned Max. And why he was *really* here.

They were on the couch together, the tv muted, still holding hands. Mike's palm was warm and slick now. He sometimes apologized to her when his hands grew wet, moving back with a frown and a flush to wipe them on his pants, but El never minded. It was *sweat*, Nancy had told her once when she came over to explain algorithms. *He's nervous*. After that, something warm and delightful always fluttered in El's stomach when his damp palm touched hers.

They rarely *weren't* holding hands during the rare times they were together after all the darkness and monsters. Once, when they'd seen each other right before the Snow Ball at the Byers' (and El had had to lie under a pile of blankets and newspapers in the back of Joyce's car and they'd watched *Wizard of Oz* after Mike had to go home), Mike had eaten three slices of Hawaiian pizza, one right after the other, with their fingers still woven, balanced on the table between them.

"Max," she said simply, turning to angle her knee to the back of the couch so she could look straight up into his eyes.

Mike's eyes flicked from the tv, which was broadcasting a Barbie commercial before Mister Rogers Neighborhood, to El's face. She felt his gaze along her cheekbone, over her nose, and then their eyes met. In her periphery, she saw his throat bob as he swallowed.

"Hmm? Max?"

"You came so we could talk about Max. You...*mentioned* her."

Mike shifted, turning so their knees touched and their entwined hands lay between them. A little *zing* of something like electricity shot up El's thigh at the firm contact. His fingers were damp with sweat, clumsy and clenching, the calluses on the very tips brushing along the back of her hand every time he fidgeted. *Nervous* El thought, giving his hand a squeeze. *Just like me*. She was pleased, in a tiny space inside herself, that he seemed just as at odds as she was. He always seemed so confident, so full of knowledge and answers and *what to do*.

"Yeah!" he replied, his free hand coming up to scratch the back of his

neck. His sweater was a riot of loose strings in reindeer shapes and his cheeks were pink. It was...adorable. (*adorable: inspiring great affection.*) “Uh, yeah. I forgot all about Max, honestly. I was just so excited to see you.”

He looked down, his grip on her hand tightening, and fireworks went off in El’s heart. She’d known when she was hugging him that he’d wanted to be there. She’d known every time he said goodbye over the Supercomm, every time he talked about his plans that included her, every single time he didn’t keep her waiting, that he cared about her. That she was someone he looked forward to seeing. Someone he kissed.

She knew he cared, felt the certainty when they were together the same way she knew the sky would be blue when she peeked through the curtains each morning, but...that was when they were together. When she only had his voice for company, only had the radio to hold and all the minutes and hours alone with her own thoughts, doubt grew. She questioned, and she wondered.

Does Mike still like me?

Is he still my...friend? Is Dustin? Is Lucas?

Have they forgotten me?

What if they don’t need me anymore?

It was like a papercut that refused to heal, constantly aching. And she had no word for it. It had been especially bad last year, during the 353 days she’d spent apart from Mike and her other friends. Each night, she’d listened to Mike’s fervent, sad voice in the Void as he told her how much he missed her, and each day she’d doubt it all, wondering if one day he’d stop calling out to her completely. Or what if...it had all been something she’d conjured up herself with her powers, to comfort her in the loneliness of the snow and the cabin and the quiet.

Then...seeing him with Max, watching their hands touch and their eyes smile at each other, witnessing the connection they’d shared when she’d had nothing but static and the dark of the Void...she needed Mike’s reassurance. She needed to know she was still a person

he wanted to touch, needed to drink up every sweaty handhold, every clumsy kiss, every pizza party and too loud, too earnest discussion like they were nutrients.

"I was excited too," she said softly, and when he finally looked up at her, smiling, she knew what she had to say. "I have to...say something. Though. About Max."

"I remember," Mike replied, just as quiet. His eyes were like stars, El thought, so bright and earnest. "You saw us together. Right? At school, in the gym. But—"

"I pulled Max off her skateboard," El whispered. She was the one not making eye contact this time, and a riot of emotions made her stomach squirm. Embarrassment, shame. Anger at herself, at her life, at *Papa*. At what he'd made her, what he'd woven inside of her. The bit of resentment that still rose in her chest when she thought of the cabin, the *rules*, Hopper yelling at her. *Grow up!*

(Hadn't she? Hadn't she grown up? Hadn't she been told to do things most kids had never been asked to? Been hurt by the people she should have been able to trust, the man who had told her to call him *Papa*? In the stories, *Papas* hugged their little girls, gave them kisses, told them they were special. They helped and encouraged them. Her *Papa* had only made her feel small and foul, like something pulled from a drain. And scared. Always scared.)

Hadn't she gone hungry, when kids like Mike, Lucas, Will, and Dustin ate three square meals and snacks? Hadn't she slept outside on leaves, in snow, her legs and face numb from cold, when other kids in Hawkins had beds? Hadn't she killed? Snapped necks and boiled blood beneath bone? That wasn't growing up? Being angry, being afraid, wanting to leave, that wasn't growing up? Hopper had...apologized to El. He'd told her his feelings, dredged up the darkness in his own heart, but a part of El would always rise in anger to that phrase. She hadn't been a child in a very long time. Perhaps she had never been a child.)

"Not just that," El shook her head, curls smacking her temples. (New sensation). "I...I...was sad. When I saw you. And...angry. You were happy. I was stuck. I had...no one to talk to."

A crease appeared between Mike's eyebrows, and his lips turned down in a concerned frown. His grip tightened on her hand and he leaned forward, his entire body curling toward her like one parenthesis meeting its match.

"El..."

"No, Mike," El insisted, flustered. She had to get the words out while she still held them within her grasp. "Don't talk. I was...angry with you. You talked to me on the radio. I heard you in the...Void. You told me you were sad I was gone, but you...had a new friend. I thought you...didn't care. I...don't know how to...I came to see you..."

Once the words came, it was impossible to stop their flow. It was the most she'd ever said to Mike, even during their nightly radioed discussions, and his surprise was obvious. He was still frowning, but his eyebrows were raised now, his mouth slightly parted. But he didn't interrupt her again, and El was relieved.

(Mike was in awe. She'd come so far from the girl in his basement with the haunting eyes and few words.)

"I was mad. And I...pulled Max off her board. And I'm so sorry. It was mean."

She looked down at their hands, clumsily knotted together, both now dampened with nervous sweat. He was still holding on to her, but for how much longer?

A moment of tentative silence passed between them, El staring intently at the freckles dotting Mike's knuckles and Mike staring, shocked, at El's bent head.

She'd come to see him. *She'd come to see him.* His surprised frown turned into a smile laced with so much affection it nearly gave him indigestion. She'd come out of hiding, broke Hopper's rules, just to see him.

And she'd knocked Max off her skateboard. *Of course* she had.

It was like a magnet pulling on my board.

Hadn't he known then, that it was El? Hadn't he felt her like a strange tingle along the base of his spine? Of course he had.

None of this surprised Mike. What shocked him though, was El's assumption that he had forgotten her. He'd called her every night. She'd been at the back of his mind every day, a song stuck in his head that refused to leave, the beat in his fingers as he drummed them on his desk, his knee: *El El Eleven El*. He'd doodled her name in the margins of his Algebra notes, thought about her dark eyes and sharp chin, the ghost of a smile she'd given him once, the feel of her hands clenching his jacket as he pedaled them up Maple Street. Daydreamed about her in her own clothes, no longer wearing his sister's hand-me-downs. Tried desperately not to dwell on her being lost and alone in the Upside Down, or worse...not around anymore at all. The idealist in him thought one day, he'd hear her quiet voice respond to his calls on the radio. She'd tell him how to find her, and he'd come for her...and...

It was ridiculous, he knew. But he'd been twelve, and then thirteen. Still the valiant Paladin. Still in many ways, the romantic. He'd absolutely refused to think of a world absent of Eleven. How could she think he'd forget her? She was a part of his heart now, braided into the veins and ventricles. There was no way he could separate her from him, discern where he began and she ended.

"El..." he said, clearing his throat when his voice cracked, unsure of how to express just how much she meant to him without seeming like some sort of freak.

"I never forgot you. Not once. I thought about you every day." When she looked up at him, her fathomless dark eyes hopeful, he spurred himself on.

"Um. You know, it was okay to feel mad. Hopper made you stay here to keep you safe, but anyone would go stir crazy. Anyone would be pissed they couldn't leave or talk to their friends. When you saw me with Max, you felt replaced, you know?"

"And you need to know, El: I could never replace you. You're one of my best friends. Absolute best. I care about you. A lot. I called you nearly every night last year and thought about you every day, I was

so worried. I didn't want you to be alone in the Upside Down or...or anywhere. If you hadn't come back by now, I'd still be calling you. I'd still be hoping I could find you. You still had a place in the Party when you were gone. You're our Mage. I--"

He was cut off by soft, warm hands on his face, fingers spread lightly over his cheeks, that syrup scented breath fanning across his mouth. El was there, so close, her eyes wet, her mouth smiling so sweetly it made his heart keen.

"Mike," she whispered. There was something so beautiful in her voice, something so hopeful. She moved closer...closer...almost straddling his knees, until their foreheads touched. Mike let out a sigh, and El breathed it in. "Mike."

And, just before their mouths touched, before their arms came around each other, before El began to cry softly in relief (*relief: release from anxiety or distress*):

"I...understand."

(He hadn't been angry at all.)